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Dreams, Numbers, Catcalls and Words

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Panel: Feminism with a Little f

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Margarita MATEO PALMER

Dreams, Numbers, Catcalls and Words

*We said that, enraptured,
and believed it perfectly,
that we would all be queens
and would one day reach the sea.*

– Gabriela Mistral: “We were all to be queens.”

During my early childhood I didn’t feel that having been born a woman could be a disadvantage. I learned to swim, to skate, to ride bikes and horses at a very early age. Later, when I found out that it was not the kindly storks which brought babies to the world but, rather, the painful labor of mothers, I asked my aunt why nature had been so unfair to women.

“Men have to work, and women don’t; they can stay home taking care of the kids,” she said. A terrible answer that led me to feel even more confused. Fortunately, my father had a very different opinion, and so he made sure my sister and I knew: “You have to study hard so when you grow up you may find a job you like, and you won’t have to put up with the demands of any man.” The law of divorce had been approved in Cuba in 1918. And this leads me to numbers.

Numbers

Sometimes statistics may speak better than words. I hope they may show some results of feminist struggles in Cuba, which started very early, at least, more than two centuries ago¹:

Cuban women obtained the right to vote in 1934.

In 1959, equal pay for men and women was established by law. 100,000 prostitutes were given education and provided with respectable jobs.

Cuba was the first Latin American country to legalize abortion in 1965.

Maternal mortality rates are very low. Cuba’s infant mortality rate is the lowest in the American Continent (including Canada and the United States).

Cuban women are entitled to pregnancy leave with full pay for one and a half months before birth and for three months after. They can extend their leave up to one year, receiving 60% of their salary. Their jobs are held secure until then.

¹ In 1762, when the English took Havana, Beatriz Jústiz de Santa Ana, wrote her "Memorial," addressed to Charles III, and the poem "Dolorosa y métrica expresión por el sitio y entrega de La Habana" with which she not only initiated feminine writing in the island but also took a stand for her civil rights.

Since 1980, women have obtained higher professional levels than all active men in the workforce. Women constitute 66.4% of technicians and professional workers such as professors, doctors, engineers, researchers, etc. Cuba holds the third place worldwide with respect to women deputies.²

Nevertheless, numbers do not provide information about the discriminatory attitudes still present in Cuban culture. And this leads me to catcalls.

Catcalls

Catcalls are common practice in Cuba. I've always felt they were an aggression, a humiliating assault which reduced me to a simple sexual object to be stared at. The majority of Cuban women, however, enjoy this game of sinuous eroticism.³ For me, catcalls roused within me the fury of Feminism with a capital F.

Machismo is still well and alive on the island. It is expressed outside of laws and can manifest in subtle ways. For women, their second job is the most difficult one: it starts when they return home from work and must answer to the more pressing domestic worries: What is there to eat? How can I cook without gas or electricity? And a long series of other problems that many men don't have to deal with. The economic crisis of the 90s in Cuba above all affected the female population. In those years a boom of literature written by women occurred. Women writers came very close together at that time and led a battle against the "Pene Club,"⁴ as we named a group of male writers. The situation was so devastating that writing—and the community that formed—was a way to escape the misery of day to day life. And this brings me to words.

Words

One of the books that most affected me in my childhood was *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. A novel from the 19th century, set in cold and faraway Massachusetts during the Civil War, moved me to see with more clarity some of the issues of sexism that I was already experiencing. When I grew up, I went further back, into the Viceroyalty of New Spain in the 17th century, to find Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her valiant indictment of asinine men. Later on, other characters, such as Jean Rhys's Antoinette, illuminated the painful road taken to become the madwoman in the attic: female voices that from the most disparate spaces, eras and cultures, spoke to a common, shared experience. The issues of gender discrimination have no borders, though they take on different forms in each context. Literature, with words that may help to heal wounds and open windows to the light, can perform an important role in this process of acknowledging a plenary female identity. In short, it can help some of our most treasured dreams be realized.

(Translation by Rebecca Hanssens-Reed)

² Lamrani, Salim, "Mujeres en Cuba: la revolución emancipadora." *Almayadeen*. 22 Agosto 2015. <http://espanol.almayadeen.net/Article/2lcnB9PEi7vaT8AR14hA/mujeres-en-cuba--la-revoluci%C3%B3n-emancipadora-1-2--por-salim-l>

³ Cf: "Si cocinas como caminas, me como hasta la raspita: A History of the Cuban Piropo" by Monique Baron from Hampshire College. Tutors: Margarita Mateo & Eduardo Hernández.

⁴ A play on words invented by writer Mirta Yáñez; it plays with the Pen Club and the fact that *penis* is *pene* in Spanish.